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ABSTRACT

While "Captain Planet and the Planeteers" has won numerous awards and is currently the number one rate household animated children's television program in the United States, the contradictions and complications of instilling environmental values in children through the medium of television are apparent. A content analysis of 15 episodes of "Captain Planet" indicates that while resource conservation and the excess of industrialism are highlighted, advertisements are interspersed encouraging consumption and individual excess. Where cooperation and teamwork are stressed by the various solutions to problems, the caricatures of good and evil build a framework that accepts no accommodation, and underscores the alienation of "Us" and "Them." Where individual actions take on increasing importance in saving the planet, the presence of an empowered super "other" allows an abdication of personal responsibility, an abdication made more likely by some of the exaggerated and easily debunked claims of the show. While science and environmental educators acknowledge the overall utility of such educational approaches, the caricatures, simplification inherent in the cartoon medium, and the artificial context of television work against a balanced environmental policy and rational discourse on critical issues facing society. (Contains 26 references. A chart listing aspects of the "Planeteers" and the villains is included; the opening monologue, lyrics to the concluding song, and the cast of the television show are attached.) (RS)

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Visual Argument for Social Ends: *Captain Planet* and the Integration of Environmental Values

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In September of 1990, the Turner Broadcasting System began televising an animated cartoon called *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*. An action-adventure featuring five eco-teenagers fighting industrial exploitation, the program emphasizes environmental themes and individual empowerment, and has become one of the highest rated children's shows on the air. Gaia, the spirit of the earth, creates five magic rings of power and gives them to five diverse teenagers from different continents. As their guide and source of power, Gaia mobilizes them to different areas of the planet to fight pollution, global warming, species extinction, the destruction of the rainforest, ozone depletion, and many other pressing problems. Each ring gives the bearer power over an element—Earth, Wind, Water, Fire, and the fifth power of Heart—and when the powers are combined, Captain Planet emerges to save the day. The narrative flow of the action and adventure is interspersed with information about habitats, pollution, ecosystems, and destructive practices. Children are encouraged to become planeteers, and are offered tips and suggestions for individual actions they can take to stop environmental destruction.

Captain Planet and the Planeteers has won numerous awards and accolades, and is currently the number one rated household animated children's program in the United States, achieving even wider audiences since it is syndicated in 96% of the nation ("Captain Planet joins," 1993). One of the first children's program targeted specifically at environmental issues, *Captain Planet* now enjoys one of the largest audiences of any animated program anywhere. Every week, it is watched by over 7 million people, and it is syndicated in over 80 countries (Jones, 1993; Messud, 1992). Captain Planet, says American Public Transit Association Executive Vice President Jack Gilstrap, has "helped to make environmental

efforts 'cool' for children" ("Captain Planet joins" 1). Ted Turner has clearly made environmental change a large part of his agenda, and *Captain Planet* is at the forefront of visual argument for social ends. The integration of environmental values, however, is a process that should be approached with some caution.

The contradictions and complications of instilling values through the medium of television are clearly apparent in this animated adventure that seeks to make environmental problems real for a whole new generation of children. Where resource conservation and the excesses of industrialism are highlighted, advertisements are interspersed encouraging consumption and individual excess. Where cooperation and teamwork are stressed by the various solutions to problems, the caricatures of good and evil build a framework that accepts no accommodation, and underscores the alienation of Us and Them. Where individual actions take on increasing importance in saving the planet, the presence of an empowered super "other" allows an abdication of personal responsibility, an abdication made more likely by some of the exaggerated and easily debunked claims of the show. This paper explores some of these tensions and contradictions, and provides a cautionary note about the use of visual argument for social ends. This exploration follows five main areas: A description of the key elements of the artifact; a discussion of caricature and attitudes; a tracing of some tensions in empowering children through the medium of television; a reflection on hierarchy and control; and some final observations about the evolution of consciousness, logos and reason in children.

Elements of the Artifact

After viewing a number of episodes of *Captain Planet*,[1] there are some easily identifiable elements that characterize the basic narrative structure of the series. The opening images and monologue (see **Appendix 1**) describe the outrage of Gaia at the desecration of the earth, the gift of the five magic rings to five children from different continents, and the process by which Captain Planet is summoned when the five rings are invoked together. Gaia lives on Hope Island, and coordinates the activities of the planeteers with information derived from the holographic visions of environmental destruction in the Crystal Chamber. The planeteers use a solar helijet to travel around the world, and frequently visit exciting tourist attractions and exotic locales. Each of the rings gives the wearer power over a particular element (Earth, Wind, Water, Fire) and over the feeling and knowledge of something (Heart).

A key feature of the program is the use of celebrity voices for both the heros and the villains. Among the celebrities lending their vocal and symbolic support to *Captain Planet* are Ed Asner, Ed Begley, Jr., LeVar Burton, James Coburn, Danny Glover, Whoopi Goldberg, Jeff Goldblum, Neil Patrick Harris, Phil Hartman, John Ratzenberger, Meg Ryan, Fred Savage, Martin Sheen, Sting, Dean Stockwell, Elizabeth Taylor, and Dennis Weaver, to name a few. Some of these voices make guest appearances on particular episodes, but some of them are periodic characters (see **Appendix 2** for a summary list of characters).

Heroic Characters

Gaia, as the spirit of the earth, has brown skin with black hair and red lips. Dressed in a white dress and a headband, she often appears evanescent, and transparent. Played by Whoopi Goldberg, Gaia is at once throaty, poignant, and imbued with a quality of common sense.

Captain Planet has green hair and gray skin, and wears a body suit with a cross-hatched circle on his chest. Played by David Coburn, Captain Planet frequently quips and puns as he fights evil and defends the earth. The five planeteers, the power of their rings, and their voices are illustrated in the following table:

The Planeteers				
Name	**Continent**	**Power**	**Characteristics**	**Voice**
Kwame	Africa	Earth	African male, black hair	LeVar Burton
Wheeler	North America	Fire	White male, red hair	Joey Dedio
Linka	Soviet Union	Wind	White female, blond hair	Kath Soucie
Gi	Asia	Water	Asian female, black hair	Janice Kawaye
Ma-Ti	South America	Heart	Indian male, black hair	Scott Neville

Ma-Ti also has a monkey, Suchi (voice by Frank Welker), that accompanies him, often getting the group into and out of trouble.

Villains

The villains are drawn in very stark terms and images. The following table includes most of the villains, their characteristics, and their voices:

The Villains		
Name	**Characteristics**	**Voice**
Looten Plunder	Handsome male, well-dressed but slightly gaudy, long hair in pony tail	James Coburn
Dr. Blight	Mad female scientists, eyepatch, shock of white hair in blond hair	Meg Ryan
Duke Nukem	Radioactive male mutant, feasts on radiation, bad skin condition; Nukem's sidekick is Leadsuit, a geeky sniveler	Dean Stockwell
Hoggish Greedly	Pig face with fangs, very overweight; Greedly's sidekick is Rigger, a skinny blond with goatee (voice by John Ratzenberger)	Ed Asner
Verminous Skumm	Half man, half rat, with tail and fangs	Jeff Goldblum
Sly Sludge	Burly male with crossing weapons belts	Martin Sheen
Zarn	Master alien villain often coordinates other villains, tall with dark hair, imperious face	?

The villains sometimes appear alone, sometimes in pairs, and for significant events (like the Earth Summit), all appear together.

Narrative Structure

Most of the stories followed the same form: opening interlude (sometimes the development of the problem, sometimes a humorous or personal episode for the planeteers), summons by Gaia for the current mission (often accompanied by information about the issue), development of the threat (usually a conspiracy to destroy the planet for money or for power), response by the planeteers, a turning of the conflict against the planeteers, the invocation of Captain Planet, who fights the villain (and may have to overcome a deadly trap), and finally an "enlightened" resolution (awareness of the seriousness of the issue).

There are frequent asides, where one character will inform another about particular aspects of a species or an ecosystem. The look and feel of some of the animation is rough, certainly not on a par with Japanese animated cartoons or Disney films, but the structure of the narrative remains fairly smooth, and certainly clear enough in presenting the mixture of information and adventure.

One recurring theme is the enlightenment, or redemption of people who begin to pollute or are polluting at the start of the story. Frequently influenced by the villain, these individuals "see the light" by the end of the program and become fervent converts to the cause of environmentalism.

The plot lines vary somewhat, but include stopping a conspiracy to prevent mass transit usage in Sydney, Australia ("Secret of the Blue Line"), preventing clones from taking over the Earth Summit ("Summit to Save Earth, parts I & II), averting the extinction of a species of tiger ("The Ark," which included a visit from an alien collecting doomed humans for their intergalactic ark), thwarting a plot to use solar technology to radiate the world ("Isle of Solar Energy"), and foiling a scheme to monopolize and sell rainforest air to cities ("Domes of Doom"). Some plots deal only peripherally with environmental issues. In "Mind Pollution," for example, Skumm is getting all Washington, D.C. residents hooked on "Bliss," a highly addictive euphoric drug which eventually kills the user. "A Formula for Hate," starring Elizabeth Taylor, deals with the AIDS crisis.

Action Alerts

After the story has been resolved, there is a final set of action options for children, a "Planeteer Alert" with information on personal action to take on the issue. These included

such tips as carpooling, combining several errands in one trip, buying small cars, keeping cars tuned up, planting a tree, starting a garden, recycling white paper, not purchasing products that require animals to die, letting the sun into the house on cold days (keeping it out on warm days), turning out the lights, and so on. Some of these anticipate actions taken later in life, others are particular actions available now to children. Many of these involve indirect actions, that is parental actions that can be influenced by children. Some of the actions are environmental specific, but others (like avoid "mind-polluting" drugs, and keep your body healthy) are general advice for living.

The Power of the Medium

Turner's *Captain Planet* is notable because it mobilizes a very traditional format for a non-traditional message. The first cartoon to consistently emphasize an environmental theme, *Captain Planet* mobilizes years of enculturation about superheros, adventurous children, and evil villains to create an awareness about a significant social issue. When these mythic hyperboles are combined with the voices of celebrities and rock stars, the legitimacy of the message is magnified by the intersection of an accepted fantasy format, credibility, and identification. While some children may not recognize James Coburn's Looten Plunder, it is hard to miss the resonance of Whoopi Goldberg's Gaia, and LeVar Burton's Kwame (made more familiar and potent by his roles in *Reading Rainbow* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*). With exciting, intelligent and empowered teenagers for role models, identification becomes a key facet of the viewing experience, which the program directly translates into the power of the individual within their own context. Barbara Pyle, executive producer of *Captain Planet*, argues that "Captain Planet is a metaphor for teamwork and

global cooperation," and that "it's empowering, [because] it shows kids that every action counts" (Walters, 1991, 13). As TBS president and board chairman Turner explains, "Captain Planet reminds us that everyone plays a vital role in solving our environmental problems and that together, we have the power to solve these problems" ("Captain Planet joins" 1). Not everyone has such a positive view of the power of this program. Such an environmental medium has been characterized as "greenwash," or brainwashing for a cleaner environment (McInnis, 1990), as emotional appeals that scientists and facts must compete with ("Bode Urges," 1993), as fiction scaring children into political activism (Bozell, in Walters), and as simplistic and overly dramatized. The animated series came in first place in the list of top 10 most biased shows published by the Media Research Center, which monitors liberal bias in the media (Walters). Even accepting that many of these reactions come from very conservative sources, the use of caricature and overstatement and the inherent relationship spelled out between humans and nature needs to be scrutinized much more closely, and the power of a program that reaches 7 million children a week in over 80 countries should be more carefully examined as an instrument for the social construction of values.

Caricature and Attitude

The use of caricature and exaggeration is a critical element in *Captain Planet*. Executive producer Pyle argues that the action-adventure cartoon format "automatically means both exaggeration and simplification" (Walters, 13). Indeed, without such devices, the cartoon would not be meaningful to children, nor would they be inclined to watch it since

such distortions and simplifications are part of what make the cartoon "fun." Such distortions and portrayals become problematic here when stark lines are drawn characterizing polluters, and when distillation shades into oversimplification and miseducation.

At a very basic level, of course, *Captain Planet* distorts environmental information because it selects (and thereby excludes) certain viewpoints, and because it dramatizes a point by exaggerating for effect. The problem of global warming, for example, is represented in the episode "Summit to Save the Earth, part I" by showing the statue of Liberty under water. Even setting aside all of the complexities of negative feedback loops, and of contradictory ice core samples, the scientists firmly committed to stopping global warming do not believe that the waters will rise that high. It is disheartening to hear students like Andy Gaillard say that "if we don't recycle, the trash would keep gathering up and ruin the Earth, . . . if somebody tried to burn it and stuff, the smoke would go up and burn a hole in the ozone layer." Without recycling, he explains, "we would all die. Its true. People have been recycling, so it hasn't happened" (Coady, 1991, 1). These misunderstandings may not characterize all students, but they represent some of the difficulty of conveying accurate information on the environment.

Visual hyperbole is used to make a point, but in doing so it risks a backlash against such apocalyptic claims when teenagers and young adults are exposed to some of the contradictions and complexities of ecological relationships. It is just not that simple, and when powerful and extravagant claims are made which even advocates deny, then the entire enterprise can be called into question. This simplification of information, even though it is

an aspect of *Captain Planet* that has received a fair amount of attention in the press, is not the central problem apparent in the use of exaggeration and hyperbole.

Caricature, writes Streicher (1967), even as it departs radically from a truth-claim, nonetheless shapes the construction of reality. In discussing the nature of political caricature, he highlights the aggressive nature of caricature:

> Caricature may be observed as a guide for the aggressor. Caricatures are negative definitions, stereotypes, which are aimed at dramatizing aggressive tendencies through the definition of targets, the collective integration of "private" feelings into public sentiments of "self-defense" and the training of hatred and debunking techniques. Caricature *interprets* nations, figures and events and helps to supplement the news presentation with statements of meaning. (438)

His observations are no less pertinent in application to animated cartoons. The depiction of the villains is outrageous hyperbole. The power of naming is invoked with "Looten Plunder," "Dr. Blight," "Hoggish Greedly," "Verminous Skumm" and others. Most adults, on hearing these names, laugh at how they distill the essence of industrial exploitation. The humor, however, involves an aggressive attitude. Likewise, the visual images that are associated with environmental destruction are very powerful. A pig face, slobbering, with fangs, leers over the money to be made selling bits of coral. A radioactive mutant with glowing scaly skin laughs grotesquely over the prospect of radiating the entire world. A human figure with a long rat nose, a slithering rat tail, and a sneering rat mouth put into effect a plan to spread "rat rot" among the public. These caricatures of industrial forces are the stuff of which nightmares are made.

In assessing the impact of exaggeration, symbolic "purification," and visual hyperbole, it is difficult to believe that children accept these depictions as reality. Coupe (1969), assessing the impact of editorial cartoons, noted that the lower the level of

sophistication and education of the audience, the greater the impact a picture is likely to have. Caricatures are able to sum up complex meanings into single powerful images, and to provide a single striking image that makes retention easier. This "striking image," Streicher writes, is offered in contrast to the "discursive reasonings and arguments" of speakers and writers (440). The emotional impact of these visceral and nightmarish images should not be underestimated.

These tendencies of the cartoon are further magnified by the near ubiquitous presence of conspiracy. In every episode viewed to date, villains were out purposefully despoiling the environment. The villains clearly enjoy destroying the environment, and wherever a problem arises, it can be traced to a hidden conspiracy or plot to make money, gain power, or enslave the world. Behind every environmental issue, the message seems to be that evil humans are plotting to carry out the destruction of the earth.

The net effect of these caricatures, including the naming, the imaging, and the portrayal of conspiracy, is to polarize the discussion of environmental issues. The framework that is being built, or integrated, into children's value structures is one of stark contrasts between good and evil, between the polluter and the activist. Such dichotomies can be and frequently are the case in many environmental controversies, but the need for a more integrative perspective is lost in using such blanket distinctions. The Pacific Northwest is finding out some of the dangers and difficulties of conflicting positions backed into a corner and unwilling to negotiate. This type of extreme caricature is hardly conducive to an understanding of the complexity of economic, ecological and social factors at work in a given controversy. Dan Gottlieb, an associate producer at TBS, argues that the program doesn't

point any fingers, and that the villains don't represent actual people, but instead they "represent the problem" (Jones, A1). Such a claim is unwarranted, however, since the "problems" walk and talk like humans, and more importantly, they *plot* like humans. The program invites the representation of larger segments of society every time there is some conspiracy to make millions of dollars by abusing the environment.

The difficulty, particularly for small children, is that while the social values are appealing and ultimately necessary from a survival perspective, the structure on which those values are inscribed is itself self-defeating. Antipathy for the sake of illustration may be necessary, but antipathy for the cause of mobilization may ultimately be counterproductive when the next generation moves to fashion solutions to complex problems. Streicher's point about the lack of discursive reasoning and logical argument implicit in caricature is well taken in the context of emotional (and what I would call adrenal) stimulation of an Us versus Them attitude. The development of mental processes by which warrants are tested, revised, assessed, and continually questioned is not occurring in *Captain Planet*. Instead, much the opposite is occurring: children are encouraged to accept exaggerated images and information from which all of the complexities have been stripped away, in effect reducing their motivation for critical thought. Even as it questions traditional assumptions of unchecked industrial expansion, the program buys into an increasingly dangerous and parochial black and white bipolar world.

Empowerment and Massage

The medium of television offers some peculiar contradictions as a mode of empowering environmental activism. Television is of course a logical choice, since it reaches to many people, and is such a central part of our culture, but it also manifestly defeats some of the messages of the pro-environment value system. McLuhan wrote over 25 years ago that "societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication" (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967, 7). That may well be true in the integration of environmental values, given the different ways in which children are "massaged" by the medium.

The first issue is simply that the television experience isolates and cocoons the viewer from a natural experience. Watching the planeteers is a wonderful vicarious experience of power, a tourist jaunt through the ecosystem of the world, but it is purely vicarious. In his discussion of ecological literacy, Orr (1992) explores some of the barriers to involving humans with a deeper understanding of how humans relate to the environment:

> The nourishment of that affinity [for the living world] is the beginning point for the sense of kinship with life, without which literacy of any sort will not help much. This is to say that even a thorough knowledge of the facts of life and of the threats to it will not save us in the absence of the feeling of kinship with life of the sort that cannot entirely be put into words. . . . Ecological literacy is becoming more difficult, I believe, not because there are fewer books about nature, but because there is less opportunity for the direct experience of it. (87, 89)

Cashman (1992) sums it up simply that "we humans cannot form that essential bond through the tube . . . Something essential is stripped from nature when it comes as a mediated image instead of a direct encounter" (30). The ability to connect to the environment, to gain that kinship, is paradoxical in viewing *Captain Planet*. While children gain a better sense of

environmental issues, they lose a sense of the environment. The mediated experience substitutes for a real nature experience, and the viewing habit substitutes day after day for interactive real time.

A second point involves the perception of time as shaped by the format of the narrative. Shanahan (1993) notes in passing that while there are a few new shows like *Captain Planet* that are devoted to environmental issues, the "world of prime-time television has always been one in which even the most complex problems are resolved in twenty-two or fifty-two minutes" (185). Like with the shortened time-frames of television legal dramas and crime stories, children begin to expect the real world to move as fast and respond as quickly as the fantasy world. The quick fix, in this instance, is the "22 minute miracle" of environmental protection. Over the long run, such a time frame may build public apathy into the system by creating unreasonable expectations. When individual actions over a few years seem to have no effect, a perception that the environmental sphere of action is susceptible to immediate solution may be laying the foundation for environmental backlash. This shortened time frame is at odds with geologic and atmospheric time, and furthering that illusion is somewhat dangerous. A more pressing issue relates to the previous point about isolation from the natural experience. Orr continues his discussion of ecological literacy, and our own ability to patiently listen to the language of nature, the sounds of animals, birds, insects, wind, and water:

> Good conversation is unhurried. It has its own rhythm and pace. Dialogue with nature cannot be rushed. It will be governed by cycles of day and night, the seasons, the pace of procreation, and by the larger rhythm of evolutionary and geologic time. Human sense of time is increasingly frenetic, driven by clocks, computers, and revolutions in transportation and communication. (91)

The time frame of the medium simply does not train us to listen to the language of nature. Just listening to the sounds of nature is an experience that many children will never have, and the medium they do listen to is not conducive to learning the language.

A third and final point about the medium is that the environmental messages are contextualized within a consumption ethic. Some of the products advertised during *Captain Planet* include: Micromachine toy cars, Captain Hook figures, Kool aid, Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Cornflakes, NBA Hoops basketball cards, SeaDuck floating planes, Treasure trolls, Dentyne gum, Blurp balls, Water baby (wetting baby), Open My Eyes (newborn baby), Ronald McDonald, Eggo mini-waffles, Baby All-Gone (bottle fed baby), and the Great Mouse Detective video, to name a few. There is also a market of Captain Planet toys, which are made with 100% recycled materials, and from which 10% of the sales go to environmental protection (Lewis, 1991). This continual parade of new and improved products, ranging from the intentionally grotesque to the unintentionally amusing, is surely the inception of the cult of commodities. Fore (1992) outlines some of the power of media in this regard:

> As Hannah Arendt points out, in today's media world it is not so much that power corrupts as that the aura of power, its glamorous trappings, attracts. Close to power are the values of wealth and property, the idea that everything can be purchased and that consumption is an intrinsic good. The values of narcissism, of immediate gratification of wants, and of creature comforts follow close behind. (6)

Burke's (1961) discussion of this imbalance, a development of excessive habits of consumption, involves the principle of desire, a psychologically frustrating principle that is never really satisfied by the "getting" of more commodities. The cult of commodities, he writes, contains many "blockings internal to its nature. It involves wasteful ways that throw

us, first of all, out of line with the laws of finance, and ultimately out of line with the demands imposed upon us by nature itself..." (235). The tension between the imposing context of these environmental messages and the message itself is inescapable. It is as if the ecology balance of the environmental message is countered by the blockings internal to the medium. Perhaps the most pernicious part is that the two are learned together: individual actions to stop wasting resources and protect the environment, and the wonderful candy-store aura of the cult of commodities. This can't help but undercut the seriousness with which children approach their own personal habits of consumption.

To summarize a critical perspective on the medium that massages children as they are enthralled with eco-adventuring, it is important to remember that no medium can substitute for the nature connection, and that the context of the message can be more important for shaping attitudes toward industrial society than the message itself. Orr offers this insight:

> [I]t follows that *the way education occurs is as important as its content*. Students taught environmental awareness in a setting that does not alter their relationship to basic life-support systems learn that it is sufficient to intellectualize, emote, or posture about such things without having to live differently. . . . Real learning is participatory and experiential, not just didactic. (91)

Hierarchy and Control

Even a brief glance at the planeteers reveals that they are "politically correct," and represent a diverse ethnic and gender group. Gender and racial equity play fairly significant roles in the program. It is also true, however, that tensions continue to reside between these explicit themes and the implicit message of the basic structure of the narrative. Two issues

that arise here are the gender roles of the core plot line, and the power, or the means, by which nature is ultimately saved.

At a very basic level, the idea of a female motherly Gaia has received criticism as a concept that sex-types the planet. Murphy (1988) argues that the perception of the Mother/Goddess in Western culture is founded largely on a patriarchal Greek and Roman mythology:

> In that mythology, Gaia begins as a parthenogenetic initiator, but quickly becomes subservient to her son-husband, Uranus. As soon as the male arrives, the female loses her independence. Hesiod states that Earth arose first and created Heaven-Uranus "equal to herself." Yet he is immediately deemed "Father Heaven" and gains control of his mother. . . . [I]t seems highly unlikely that Gaia imagery can be used without invoking any of the Greek patriarchal baggage attached to the symbol. (156)

This last point seems especially true of *Captain Planet*, with its assignment of gender and roles in the plotline. Ostensibly, the program is very egalitarian: the two female planeteers are bright (usually informing the males about environmental problems), and wield the power on an equal basis with the other males. Gaia is omnipresent, and with Whoopi's voice presents a caring yet forceful gender model. In one episode ("Send in the Clones"), the daughter of a native family wants to go to school to be an ecologist, in opposition to her cultural role, and by the end she saves the day with her knowledge of ecology and her parents eventually recognize her potential merit as a scientist. In another ("Isle of Solar Energy"), the daughter of an inventor is an inventor herself, and shows off her solar "toys" to Kwame. These women seem empowered, and deserving of equal treatment.

This approach to gender, however, is undercut by some of the explicit relationships spelled out in the show. There are several significant features here. The first is that Gaia's role is basically to stay at home, on Hope Island. Her head and face often appear elsewhere,

summoning or informing planeteers, but her main function is to stay at home as the central coordinator of the teenager's activities. A central aspect of her role is her vision of environmental problems. When "briefing" the planeteers, Gaia brings them to the Crystal Chamber, where they have an omniscient view of ecological problems and villainous activities. Her job is to "see" the problems, alert others, and coordinate their activities while they save the planet. These seem very traditional female roles, and where some of the plotlines vary and gender issues may or may not be addressed, these roles stay constant across all episodes. The dominant female image in *Captain Planet* is passive, coordinating the activities of others, visualizing the problems that others will solve.

The problem is compounded by the emergence of the virile male figure to save the planeteers. While Captain Planet is vulnerable to toxic sludge (similar to Kryptonite), he is the coalescence of all powers into one, the ultimate symbol of male potency. Even as a metaphor for teamwork, the linking of the individual rings of power, he is the active and aggressive part of the show's matrix of power. In addition, he is very nonchalant about the use of his powers, and he quips and puns his way through the fights with the villains. Except for the planeteer alerts, virtually every sentence he says is a joke or a "dis" on the villain. Here is the typical male character: bravura, potency, activity all rolled into one.

These respective roles are problematic because they enact the very stereotypes the program tries to counter in other areas. The passive/active split is very clear, as is the distillation of gender type. Now it is important for children to understand the passive nature of the earth in a very real way: the earth does need help, and while its powers of recovery are immense, an understanding of its passive nature is important in integrating environmental

values in an active framework. It is also true, however, that reifying traditional roles, at a very formative time in children's cognitive development, may have significant implications over the lifetime of these young planeteers. Murphy explains the tensions within the sex-typing of the popular development of the image of Gaia:

> "Man" functions as the intellect and protector of his mother and mate; *he* ensures *her* survival. Clearly, Lovelock and Epton's purpose in providing such an analogy is to explain the relation of humanity and biosphere and thereby, in part, to counter anthropocentrism. In so doing, however, they unwittingly reinforce androcentrism by rendering the female side of the duality passive. It would appear that the name Gaia is an unfortunate choice as it immediately encourages stereotypes that reinforce the patriarchal thinking that has produced the very anthropocentrism they oppose. (157)

In speculations on the nature of value-hierarchical thinking, Warren (1990) argues that dominion over women and dominion over nature are parallel elements in the *logic of domination*. Hierarchical thinking is not necessarily the problem, she argues, but the way in which value-hierarchical thinking and value dualisms are used to justify subordination. In short, the implications of *Captain Planet* may extend far beyond the range of environmental issues, and the power of the role-imagery may extend far beyond the immediate into more fully developed justifications for subordination of the passive to the active.

Which brings us to the second major point about hierarchy and control, the very nature of the power wielded by the planeteers. The premise that underlies the entire narrative theme of the show is that *the way to save nature is to exert control over it*. The magic rings are the embodiment of dominion. They give total power over a particular element as an instrument to be used in saving that element. At a very general level, this may be the function of the medium itself. Fore asks "[w]hat are the values that the mass media communicate to us on behalf of our culture? Power heads the list: power over others;

power over nature" (6). The dispute over deep ecology centers around some of this issue—can humans control nature and still operate with an appropriate sense of biological egalitarianism necessary for a significant realignment of priorities and policies? The answer that Naess and others give is that efforts at control without a shifting of attitudes is only "shallow" ecology, and that control favors a "man-in-environment" image that should be rejected in favor of a relational, "total-field" image (Naess, 1973).

This issue of control over nature is highlighted by an episode ("Secret of the Blue Line") in which Suchi, Ma-Ti's monkey, is fitted with a camera and sent into a corporate headquarters to infiltrate and photograph the company's files. Such brazen depictions reduce nature in this instance to pure instrumentality.[2] There is something fundamentally paradoxical about feeling free to use nature to save nature. The degree of control established by the planeteers is somewhat scary, since they can move earth, wind, fire, and water at will. Ma-Ti, with the power of Heart, can vision from a distance, and can control the behavior of animals to help the planeteers. Such far-reaching powers are impressive, but they are further evidence of the utility of nature. Perhaps the most disturbing part is that in saving the environment, these means of control are dominant and may be perceptually exclusive. Other modes of interacting with the environment, such as leaving it alone, or regulating against its abuse, or even working with it, can be lost in the consistent and constant display of might and power over nature. The hierarchy so reviled in a villainous domination of nature is also paradoxically apparent in the socially justified instrumental exercise of dominion over nature.

The Evolution of Consciousness

This critique has focused largely on the negative elements in *Captain Planet*, remaining chiefly in a debunking mode in approaching the power of this animated children's program. If you asked me, "would you rather that there be no *Captain Planet*?," I would probably answer no. Such environmental information, targeted at children when they are young, at least give a chance to long-range efforts to incorporate environmental values into social policies. Assessing the impact of television on the internalization of experience, Watkins (1985) defends viewing as a dominant activity that provides models for behavior, a wealth of information, and education about the values of the dominant culture. Unique among other dominant activities of children, changes in television viewing are based primarily on changes in cognitive development, social experience, and sophistication (332). The increasing awareness of children about environmental issues, and the problems we face, is indicative to some degree of the power of the medium to shape social priorities.

The youth movement is immensely powerful, with millions of young children joining organizations such as Kids for Saving Earth, Kids for a Cleaner Environment, Kids Against Pollution, and numerous other groups. Children influence corporations, government, and behavior within their own family. In one survey, 63% of the children try to get their parents to recycle, and 52% try to get them to buy environmentally responsible products (Barnard, 1992, B5). There is really no question but that this animated program provides information about personal environmental practices and instills some sense of the intrinsic value of natural habitats and ecosystems in its viewers. With over 7 million people watching it a week, that makes it a very potent resource in shaping values for future generations. Barbara

Pyle looks at it this way: "A 5-year-old can't prevent an oil spill, but when that 5-year-old grows up and becomes a 25-year-old, and is working for an oil company, I bet those (oil) tankers are double-hulled" (Carman, 1990, 3). Deborah Cowman, of the Museum of Natural Science's environmental office justifies the overall utility of such educational approaches: "While maybe it's a superficial level of awareness (that children are gaining), but it's better than no awareness" (Dawson, 1992, A1). There is a clear rationale for such programs, and a definite need to excite and inform young children about the environmental problems we as both a local and a global community face.

The suspicion brought to this critique, however, comes from the nature and the context of the message. Gumpert and Cathcart's (1985) conception of a new media grammar, a function of literacy in different media, is of interest here at the intersection of the medium and environmental values. The biases and attitudes implied by a grammar of television is further affected for young children by a grammar of cartoons (a primary media transmission for that age level). As such, we should follow their advice to be careful about the "subtle changes in sensibilities that arise as new media technologies are incorporated into our consciousness . . ." (33). The particular sensibilities discussed in this paper are of particular concern to those interested in maximizing effective social action on the environment into the next century.

The point is this: the caricature of industrial exploitation/environmental salvation, the simplification implicit in the cartoon medium, and the mixed blessings of the artificial context of television work against a balanced environmental philosophy and rational discourse

on critical issues facing society. The conservative view of Mortimore (Young, 1992) in *The Guardian* is worth taking note of:

> An environmentalist himself, Mortimore is concerned that the cause as a whole will suffer unless these issues are treated more objectively. "If a generation of kids comes out of school and discovers that what they were taught has been discredited scientifically," he says, "they will not take the question seriously. There is a risk of overloading the factual, informational side with a moral burden which is not always soundly based." He objects to a dogmatic approach to the environment, something children are particularly susceptible to, as George Orwell pointed out in 1984. By uncritically reflecting green propaganda, cartoons such as FernGully, Captain Planet and The Smoggies are encouraging children to think about these issues ideologically, rather than rationally or scientifically. (27)

While the notion of green propaganda may be overstated here, the concern is not. Killingsworth and Palmer (1992) identify a central concern with *ecospeak*, the polarization of diverse groups on environmental issues. When individuals and groups work from such starkly contrasted ethical and philosophical assumptions, "conflict endures with no end in sight":

> [P]ublic division are petrified, conflicts are prolonged, and solutions are deferred by a failure to criticize deeply the terms and conditions of the environmental dilemma. . . . Like Newspeak, the austere vocabulary of mind control in Orwell's politicolinguistic fable 1984, ecospeak becomes a form of language and a way of framing arguments that stops thinking and inhibits social cooperation rather than extending thinking and promoting cooperation through communication. (4, 8-9)

It is certainly true that "victimage" and polarization have been essential parts of mobilizing action on the environment, and of forcing industrial practices to accommodate environmental concerns. When such polarized thinking becomes ingrained, via visual hyperbole, the naming of the Other, and oversimplified depiction, then our culture risks paralysis and strife over the long run. This new environmental cartoon "grammar," received by millions of 5- to 10-year-olds, will last a very long time.

Endnotes

[1]For this study, fifteen episodes of *Captain Planet* were recorded in the Spring of 1993. After viewing them closely, it was apparent that the basic narrative structure remains the same across the series. Analysis therefore focused on these fifteen episodes.

[2]Burke (1985) also explores some of the tension between the principle of personality and the principle of instrumentality. The principle of instrumentality is what characterizes the separation of humans from nature by instruments of their own making. The rings, in this light, may well reify the distinction between humans and nature. It may also be worth speculating about the peculiar juncture of the two principles in the instrumental personification of Captain Planet. The sum of all the powers, he is truly a peculiar mode of departure from nature.

Appendix 1
Opening Monologue

Our world is in peril

Gaia, the spirit of the Earth, can no longer stand the terrible destruction plaguing our planet
She sends five magic rings to five special young people

Kwaame, from Africa, the power of Earth
From North America, Wheeler, with the power of Fire
From the Soviet Union, Linka, with the power of Wind
From Asia, Gi, with the power of Water
And from South America, Ma-ti, with the power of Heart

When the five powers combine, they summon earth's greatest champion, Captain Planet
"Go Planet!"
THE POWER IS YOURS!

Concluding Song

Earth, Fire, Wind, Water, Heart
Go Planet!
"By your powers combined, I am Captain Planet"

Captain Planet, he's our hero,
Gonna take pollution down to zero
He's our powers, magnified,
and he's fighting on the planet's side
Captain Planet, he's our hero,
Gonna take pollution down to zero
Gonna help him put asunder,
Bad guys who like to loot and plunder

"You'll pay for this, Captain Planet"

"We're the Planeteers
You can be one too
Cause saving our planet is the thing to do"

"Looting and polluting is not the way,
hear what Captain Planet has to say"

THE POWER IS YOURS!

Muir, *Captain Planet* and the Integration of Environmental Values, p. 25

Appendix 2
The Cast of Captain Planet

Heros

	Voice
Gaia — Spirit of the Earth (dusky skin with white robe, transparent, headband) Lives on Hope Island, Crystal Chamber allows Gaia to "see" events elsewhere Gaia is "mission control" for actions taken by the Planeteers	Whoopi Goldberg
Captain Planet — Hero summoned by joining of magic rings (green hair, gray skin) Contains powers of all five rings, is vulnerable to toxic sludge Constantly punning and quipping as he dispatches villains	David Coburn
Kwame — Africa, power of Earth (African male, black hair)	Le Var Burton
Wheeler — North America, power of Fire (white male, brash, red hair)	Joey Dedio
Linka — Soviet Union, power of Wind (white female, cerebral, blond hair)	Kath Soucie
Gi — Asia, power of Water (Asian female, black hair)	Janice Kawaye
Ma-Ti — South America, power of Heart (Indian male, black hair)	Scott Neville
Suchi — Ma-Ti's monkey	Frank Welker

Villains

Looten Plunder — handsome male, smooth, long hair in pony tail, a dresser	James Coburn
Dr. Blight — mad female scientist, white patch of hair, eyepatch	Meg Ryan
Duke Nukem — radioactive male mutant, feasts on radiation, bad skin condition	Dean Stockwell
Nukem's sidekick is Leadsuit, a geeky sniveler	
Hoggish Greedly — pig face with fangs, overweight	Ed Asner
Greedly's sidekick is Rigger	John Ratzenberger
Verminous Skumm — 1/2 man, 1/2 rat with tail and fangs	Jeff Goldblum
Sly Sludge — Burly male with crossing weapon belts	Martin Sheen
Zarn — Master alien villain coordinating the other villains, ordinary looking	?

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